Book Review

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Miroslav Volf, *Allah: A Christian Response*

(New York, NY: HarperOne, 2011).

Borne of various causes, from ignorance and misunderstanding to anger, hostility and hatred, tension has always characterized the relationship between Christians and Muslims. Do Christians and Muslims worship the same God? This is the question that Miroslav Volf answers in his recently published *Allah: A Christian Response.* Dr. Volf is the Henry B. Wright Professor of Theology at Yale Divinity School and founding director of the Yale Center for Faith & Culture. In the "hot and spicy dish"[1] that is *Allah*, Volf offers a sustained ten-point argument that Christians and Muslims worship the same God on the grounds that both parties believe that God is one, benevolent and loving, and that the command to love God with one's entire being and one's neighbor as oneself is central to both faiths. It is this key commonality that allows both parties to remain true to their faiths while simultaneously pursuing peace under the same political roof.[2]

Volf follows a careful methodology as he advances his position. First he makes it clear that he writes from a Christian perspective and addresses his work to a primarily Christian audience. This means that while Muslims and people from other religious backgrounds are welcome to read and critique his research, he does not "write for Muslims, telling them what to believe and how to lead their lives."[3] Next, he narrows his focus to the commonalities between normative[4] Islam and normative Christianity. Finally, in his investigation of the parallels between the two religions, he is up-front about his methodology of focusing on sufficient similarities while also keeping an eye out for decisive differences.[5]

Volf presents his work in four parts. After introducing the issue and laying out the ground rules, in Part 1 he examines the approaches of three influential Christian theologians, past and present, who wrestled with this issue: Benedict XVI, the current pope; Nicholas of Cusa, a fifteenth-century Roman Catholic cardinal; and the great Protestant reformer Martin Luther. Volf begins by analyzing the events leading up to the release of the "A Common Word" document in 2007. Though initially opposed, Benedict XVI was able to jointly affirm with the signatories that Muslims and Christians share a common belief in the one true God and a mutual commitment to love God and neighbor.[6] Next, within the context of the

1. 14–16.
2. 13–14.
3. 12.
4. This is defined as what Muslims and Christians are taught to believe about God in their holy books and by their great teachers (112). Normative Islam includes the teaching of the Qur'an and the beliefs of Muslim majorities. Normative Christianity includes the classical expressions of the Christian faith, including important beliefs such as the doctrines of the Trinity, the incarnation, and justification by grace through faith (11).
5. 91.
6. 38.

siege and fall of Constantinople at the hands of the Ottoman Turks, Nicholas of Cusa set out to prove that Muslims worship the same God as Christians, based on the Platonic idea that everyone is in pursuit of the good.[7] He argued that a common faith is necessary to promote world peace because the existence of multiple faiths incites violence (religious wars fuel actual wars).[8] Theologically, the greatest obstacle Nicholas faced was demonstrating that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is in accordance with the Muslim doctrine of the oneness of God (Tawhid).[9] He argued that the Qur'an is not denying the authentic Christian doctrine of the Trinity, but is rightly rejecting an incorrect version of this doctrine.[10] Also within the context of the threat of the Ottoman Empire, Luther also dealt with Christian and Muslim understandings of God. Though Luther was harsh with his opponents (because in his view they missed the key aspect of God's nature, that is, his unconditional love) he nevertheless affirmed that Muslims (along with Catholics) worship the same God.

Part II begins with Volf delving into the etymology of "Allah." He argues that Christians should not reject it as a title for God. Allah is simply the Arabic word and descriptive term that refers to "God, god." This is identical to the Hebrew use of *elohim* in the Hebrew Bible and the Greek use of *theos* in the New Testament to refer to "god(s)" in general and as titles for the Judeo-Christian God. Moreover, Volf points out that Arabic-speaking Christians have historically used Allah as a title for God. Volf spends the bulk of this section working out six points of "sufficient similarities" between normative Christianity and normative Islam:

1. There is only one God, the one and only divine being.
2. God created everything that is not God.
3. God is radically different from everything that is not God.
4. God is good.
5. God commands that we love God with our whole being.
6. God commands that we love our neighbors as ourselves.[11]

In closing this section, Volf argues that:

1. *To the extent that* Christians and Muslims embrace the normative teachings of Christianity and Islam about God, they believe in a common God.
2. *To the extent that* Christians and Muslims strive to love God and neighbor, they *worship* that same God.[12]

In Part III Volf returns his focus to Trinitarian theology and the doctrine of God in relationship to Islamic monotheism. His goal is for both Christians and Muslims to recognize that the Qur'an's objections to polytheism do not apply to the normative Christian understanding of the Trinity.[13] In the remainder of this section, Volf turns his attention to the divine attributes of mercy, justice and, most importantly, love. While Volf

7. 48. In Plato's theory of Forms, everything good in the world is made so through the existence of the supreme good. In the Platonism of the church fathers and medieval theologians, God is identified with the supreme good, which is good through itself. The same method applies to ideas such as love and justice. Furthermore, though some people desire wrong or bad things that they erroneously believe to be good, everyone ultimately desires the supreme good, which is God himself.

8. 47.

9. A summary of his argument can be found on pages 51–54. It is interesting to note that the Islamic idea of Tawhid (the oneness of God) that is central to its faith is very similar to the heart of classical theism, rooted in the attribute of divine simplicity.

10. 54.

11. 110.

12. 123.

13. For a succinct summary of his argument, see Miroslav Volf, "A Christian Response to Muslims: Allah and the Trinity," *Christian Century* (March 8, 2011).

concedes that some Muslims would be uncomfortable with the assertion that God *is* love,[14] they often affirm his love, compassion, mercy and justice. Moreover, there are Muslim scholars, such as the fourteenth-century Ahmad ibn Taymiyya, who rooted God's love for the world in his own eternal self-love.[15]

In the final section, Volf explores a variety of issues related to political theology and how the common belief and worship of the same God impacts sociopolitical relations between Muslims and Christians. While making it clear that Islam and Christianity are separate religions,[16] Volf explores the topic of syncretism and comes to the conclusion that "in holding many Muslim convictions and engaging in many Muslim practices, you can still be 100 percent Christian."[17] Next he explores the topics of conversion and evangelism in relationship to the corresponding Islamic idea of *da'wa* (call, invitation). He demonstrates that normative Islam rejects the spread of faith via violence and the sword.[18] Furthermore, he argues that Muslims and Christians can be allies in promoting a shared vision of human flourishing based on love of God and neighbor.[19] Finally, he argues that even religious exclusivists should be political pluralists because a shared monotheistic faith rooted in love of God and neighbor mandates political pluralism.[20]

Overall, *Allah* is a timely theological work to engage our twenty-first century context, where building bridges with Christian-Muslim relations is needed more than ever. Volf does an admirable job of conveying important information to a broad audience and dispelling two prevalent myths: that Trinitarian theology and Christology do not conflict with the principles of monotheism; and that Islam should not be viewed as a violent religion in marked contrast to the Christian faith based on love. However, the biggest unanswered question I have after reading is how does normative Islam view the relationship between church and state? Volf makes a successful argument for how Christian religious exclusivists are able to be political pluralists, but does the same argument hold true for Muslims?

Allah has received a lot of professional and non-professional criticism. Many support Volf's reconciliatory approach. Detractors will often critique him for failing to present a balanced evaluation of the similarities between Christianity and Islam by not engaging important differences between both religions. However, such critics fail to understand his primary objective. As he makes clear in outlining his methodology, Volf writes as a committed Christian who sees love of God and neighbor as the center of his faith. This faith alone contains all the necessary impetus for Christians to actively pursue peace with Muslims and approach them with love. While it does not provide a complete analysis of Christian-Muslims relations, it is from this position of Christian love that Volf is able to advance his political-theological agenda to its furthest in *Allah*. Hopefully his work will spark research interests among scholars and theologians worldwide to dialogue with him and work towards the common good of proactively building bridges towards peace.

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14. 182. This is because they tend to root divine attributes in God's will, as opposed to his essential being or nature. Interestingly enough, this is a critique Benedict XVI made in the first chapter (24–25).

15. 166–7.

16. 193–194.

17. 199.

18. 210.

19. 218.

20. His argument here is that two essential features of monotheism favor political pluralism. First is the idea that since love of God and neighbor constitutes one's core identity (in a way that transcends all religious, national and ethnic associations), pluralism is only logical (230–231, 254). Furthermore this core identity cares an essential ethical dimension that mandates pluralism (227).